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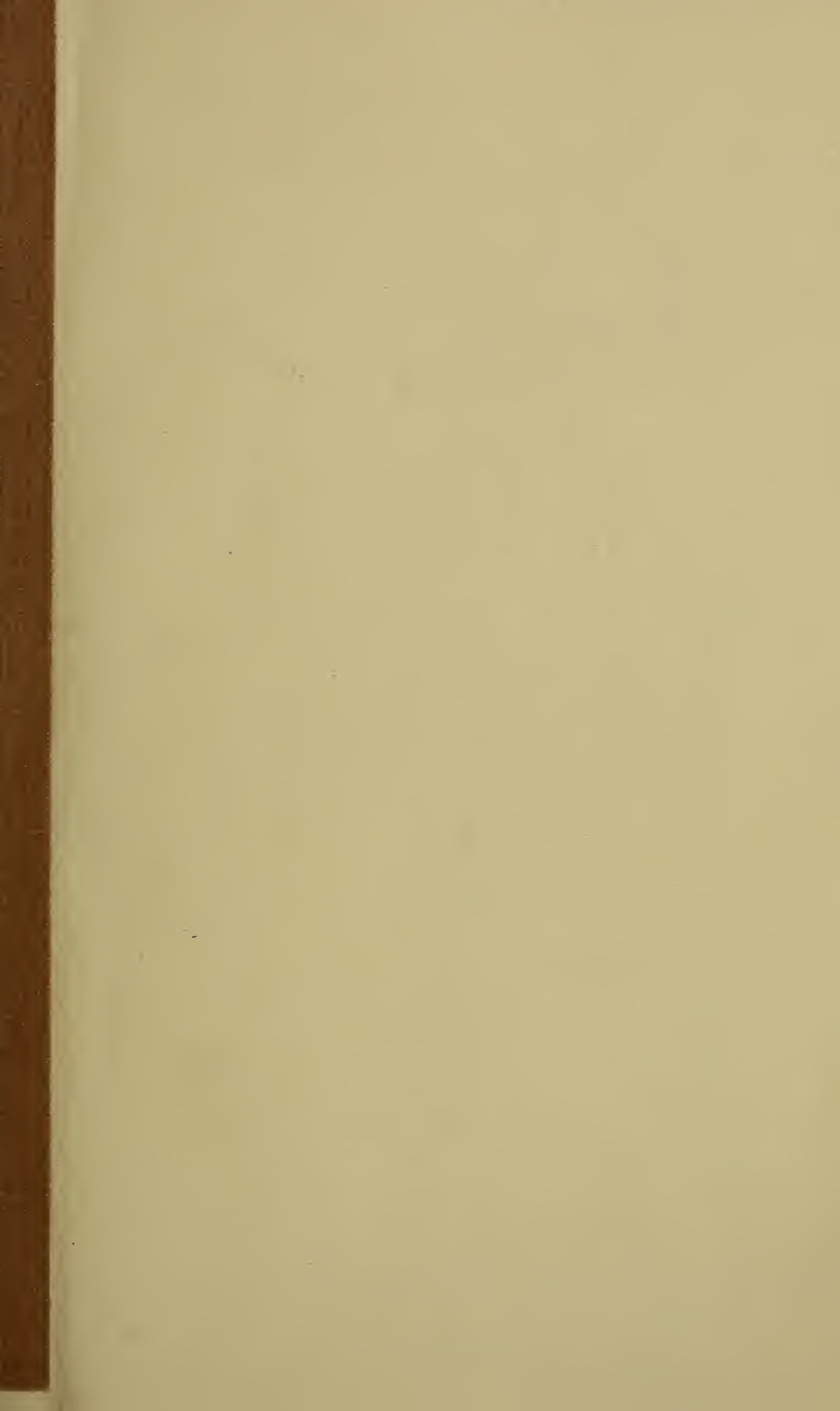
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
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..... P. F. SCHOFIELD



The Quest of the Holy Grail

By

Edwin A. Abbey, R.A.



*The American Art
Galleries*

*Madison Square South
New York*

EXHIBITION
AT THE
AMERICAN ART GALLERIES
MADISON SQUARE SOUTH
OF THE
SECOND HALF
OF THE
Series of Paintings

PRESENTING
"The Quest of
the Holy Grail"

Done for the decoration of
THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF BOSTON

BY
EDWIN A. ABBEY, R.A.

*Open daily 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., from Monday, December 9th
to Saturday, December 21st, inclusive*

AMERICAN ART ASSOCIATION, MANAGERS
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PREFATORY NOTE

THE story of the Quest of the Holy Grail has been treated by poets and composers, but the present undertaking is perhaps the first attempt to give it continuous pictorial illustration. Invited to cover, with a series of designs having at once a romantic reference and a unity of theme, the walls of a large room in the New Public Library of Boston, Mr. Abbey conceived the idea of unfolding, in a coherent order, several of the features of one of the most confused and mystical, but most noble and universal, clusters of legend that have come down to us from the twilight of European literature, through the medium, in England, of Walter Mapes; in France, of Chrétien de Troyes; and in Germany, of Wolfraun, of Eschenbach; all twelfth century writers. The artistic question became for Mr. Abbey largely a question of selection and adaptation—adaptation, in particular, to conditions of space and architectural form in the particular chamber to be decorated. Certain simplifications and compressions were inevitable, such as in the present series; the attribution to a single hero of adventures and experiences of which, in the old romances, now one personage, now another—Galahad, Percival, Lancelot, Sir Bors—becomes the wonderful subject. The incarnation of the ideal knighthood in the group here exhibited is that stainless Sir Galahad, with whom—on different

lines—a great English poet has touched the imagination of all readers.

The Holy Grail was fabled to be the sacred vessel from which our Lord had eaten at the Last Supper, and into which (having purchased it from Pontius Pilate), Joseph of Arimathea had gathered the divine blood of His wounds. Its existence, its preservation, its miraculous virtues and properties were a cherished popular belief in the early ages of European Christianity; and in the folk-tales from which the twelfth century narrators drew their material, it was represented as guarded for ages in the Castle of the Grail by the descendants of the “rich man,” to whom the body of Jesus had been surrendered, where it awaited the coming of the perfect knight, who alone should be worthy to have knowledge of it. This perfect knight is introduced to us in the romances of the Arthurian cycle, so largely devoted to the adventures of the various candidates for this most exalted of rewards. Incomparable were the properties of the Grail, the enjoyment of a revelation of which conveyed, among many privileges, the ability to live, and to cause others to live, indefinitely without food, as well as the achievement of universal knowledge, and of invulnerability in battle.

This revelation was the proof and recompense of the highest knightly purity, the perfection constituting its possessor the type of the knightly character; so that the highest conceivable emprise for the companions of the Round Table was to attain to such a consecration—to cause the transcendent vessel to be made manifest to them.

PAINTINGS

BY E. A. ABBEY, R.A.

THE first five of this Series, viz., Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, are already fixed in their places in the New Public Library at Boston, and those now exhibited comprise the second half of the Series, viz., Nos. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, but in the present Catalogue the entire series is recorded in order to give to the spectator the complete story of "The Quest of the Holy Grail." Photographs of Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are here exhibited.

No. I

THE child Galahad, the descendant, by his mother, of Joseph of Arimathea, is visited, among the nuns who bring him up, by a dove bearing a golden censer and an angel carrying the Grail, the presence of which operates as sustenance to the infant. From the hands of the holy women, in the legend, the predestined boy passes into those of the subtle Gurnemanz, who instructs him in the knowledge of the things of the world, and in the duties and functions of the ideal knight. But before leaving the nuns he has performed his nightly vigil—watched alone, till dawn, in the church.

No. 2

THIS ordeal of the vigil terminates in his departure. Clothed in red, he is girt for going forth, while the nuns bring to him Sir Launcelot, who fastens on one of his spurs, and Sir Bors, who attaches the other.

No. 3

THE Arthurian Round Table and the curious fable of the Seat Perilous is here dealt with: the Seat Perilous—"perilous for good and ill"—in which no man has yet sat with safety, not even the fashioner himself, but into which, standing vacant while it awaits only a blameless occupant, the young Sir Galahad, knighted by Arthur, has sworn a vow to be worthy to take his place. In this design he comes to do so. The Companions of the Order are seated in Arthur's hall, and every chair, save one, is filled. Suddenly the doors and windows close of themselves, the place becomes suffused with light, and Sir Galahad, robed in red (the color emblematic of purity), is led in by an old man clothed in white, Joseph of Arimathea, who, according to one of the most artless features of the romance, has subsisted for centuries by the possession of the supreme relic. The young knight is thus installed in

safety in the "Seat Perilous," above which becomes visible the legend, "This is the seat of Galahad."

No. 4

THE knights are here seen about to go forth on their search for the Holy Grail, now formally instituted by King Arthur. They have heard Mass and are receiving the episcopal benediction, Sir Galahad always in red. Although throughout this series he is the "bright boy-knight" of Tennyson, he is not, as that poet represents him, "white-armored."

No. 5

AMFORTAS, the Fisher King, King of the Grail, as the legend has it—the Roi Pêcheur of Chrétien de Troyes—having been wounded several centuries before for taking up arms in the cause of unlawful love, lies under a spell, with all the inmates of the Castle of the Grail, into which the artist here introduces us. They are spiritually dead, and although the Grail often appears in their very midst, they cannot see it. From this strange perpetuation of ineffectual life they can none of them, women or men, priests, or soldiers, or courtiers, be liberated by death until the most blameless knight shall at last arrive. It

will not be sufficient, however, that he simply penetrate into the castle: to the operation of the remedy is attached that condition which recurs so often in primitive romance, the asking of a question on which everything depends. Sir Galahad has reached his goal, but at the very goal his single slight taint of imperfection, begotten of the too worldly teaching of Gurnemanz, defeats his beneficent action. Before him passes the procession of the Grail, moving between the great fires and the trance-smitten king, and gazing at it he tries to arrive, in his mind, at an interpretation of what it means. He sees the bearer of the Grail, the damsel with the Golden Dish (the prototype of whom was Herodias bearing the head of John the Baptist on a charger), the two knights with the Seven-branched Candlestick, and the knight holding aloft the Bleeding Spear. The duty resting upon him is to ask what these things denote, but, with the presumption of one, who supposes himself to have imbibed all knowledge, he forbears, considering that he is competent to guess. But he pays for his silence, inasmuch as it forfeits for him the glory of redeeming from this paralysis of centuries the old monarch and his hollow-eyed Court, forever dying and never dead, whom he leaves folded in their dreadful doom. On his second visit, many years later, he is better inspired.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE SERIES

No. 6

IT is the morning after his visit to the Castle of the Grail. Awakening in the chamber to which he had been led the previous night, he finds the castle deserted. Issuing forth, he sees his horse saddled and the drawbridge down. Thinking to find in the forest the inmates of the castle, he rides forth, but the drawbridge closes suddenly behind him; a wail of despair follows him, and voices mock him for having failed to ask the effectual Question.

He fares forward and presently meets three damsels; the first, the Loathly Damsel, is riding upon a pale mule with a golden bridle. This lady, once beautiful in form and features, is now noble still in form, but hideous in feature, and she wears a red cloak, and a hood about her head, for she is bald; and in her arms is the head of a dead king, encircled with a gold crown. The second lady is riding in the manner of an esquire; the third is on her feet, dressed as a stripling, and in her hand is

a scourge with which she drives the two riders. These damsels are under the spell of the Grail Castle. Against her will, a magic power is used by the Loathly Damsel to tempt and destroy knights and kings. She, with her two companions, must continue to wander, doing deeds of wickedness, until the sinless Virgin Knight shall come to the Grail Castle and ask concerning the wonders he sees there. They now assail Sir Galahad with reproaches, cursing him for having failed on the previous day to ask the Question, which not only would have delivered them and the inmates of the castle, but would have restored peace and plenty to the land. The earth now must remain barren, and Sir Galahad, wandering forth again, is followed by the curses of the peasantry, while war rages throughout the land. He must encounter many adventures, suffer many sorrows, and many years must pass before he returns once more to the Castle of the Grail, where, having through all ordeals remained sinless, he will finally ask the Question which will redeem the sin-stricken land.

No. 7

SIR GALAHAD is here seen arriving at the gate of the "Castle of the Maidens," where the seven "Knights of Darkness," the seven "Deadly Sins," have imprisoned a great

company of maidens, "The Virtues," in order to keep them from all contact with man. It is Sir Galahad's mission to overcome Sin and redeem the world by setting free the Virtues, now held captive by the powers of evil, and he fights the seven knights and overcomes them.

No. 8

SIR GALAHAD having passed the outer gate of the castle is here encountering a monk, who blesses him, and delivers up to him the keys of the castle.

No. 9

SIR GALAHAD'S entry into the castle is here shown. The imprisoned maidens have long been expecting him, for it had been prophesied that the perfect knight would come to deliver them. They welcome him with shy delight, putting out their hands to be kissed. Having accomplished this mission, Sir Galahad passes on to other deeds.

No. 10

SIR GALAHAD has become wedded to Blanchefleur, but, sacrificing his earthly love, he leaves her that he may continue the

Quest. The wounded and sin-stricken Amfortas can be healed only by a Virgin Knight, and only a Virgin Knight may achieve the Quest. A new-born knowledge has unsealed Sir Galahad's eyes, but with this knowledge is begotten the strength to overcome, and, renouncing, finally, every human desire, he resumes the Quest.

NO. II

HAVING passed through many adventures, Sir Galahad has here returned to the Castle of the Grail. The procession of the Grail has once more passed before him, and this time, grown wise by knowledge and suffering, he asks the Question, and thereby heals Amfortas, cleanses him from sin, and allows the old king to die. The Angel bears away the Grail from the castle, and it is not seen again until the day when Sir Galahad achieves the Grail at Sarras. Having now accomplished his great task, the spirit of the Grail guides him towards the goal which shall crown his labors—the achievement of the Grail. He is directed towards the sea, to Solomon's Ship, which will bear him to Sarras, there to be crowned king, and there the Grail itself will finally appear to him.

No. 12

SIR GALAHAD, borne upon a white charger, is seen passing from the land, where peace and plenty once more reign, and followed by the blessings of the people.

No. 13

SIR GALAHAD is here in Solomon's Ship, which he found waiting to carry him across the seas to Sarras. The Grail, borne by an angel, guides the ship. Sir Bors and Sir Percival accompany him, for although, having sinned once, they can never see the Grail themselves, yet, having persevered faithfully in the Quest, they have acquired the right to accompany Sir Galahad and witness his achievement. Resting upon a cushion in the stern of the ship are three spindles made from the "Tree of Life"—one snow-white, one green, one blood-red. When Eve was driven from the Garden of Eden, she carried with her the branch she had plucked from the "Tree of Life," and, having planted it, the branch grew to be a tree, with branches and leaves white, in token that Eve was a virgin when she planted it. When Cain was begotten, the tree turned green; and afterwards, when Cain slew Abel, the tree turned red.

No. 14

THE CITY OF SARRAS

No. 15

SIR GALAHAD is now King of Sarras, and upon a hill he makes a Sacred Place and builds a Golden Tree. Morning and evening he repairs thither, and from day to day he beautifies the tree, and, finally, when it is complete, Joseph of Arimathea (with a company of angels) appears with the Grail. As Sir Galahad gazes upon it, crown, sceptre, and robe fall from him. He no longer needs them. He thanks God for having let him see that which tongue may not describe, nor heart think. Having now beheld that which is the source of all life and knowledge and power, his spirit can no longer remain in the narrow confines of his body. The Grail itself is borne heavenward, and is never again seen on this earth.

